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ABSTRACT

One writing instructor and her colleagues use the concept of teachers modeling responses for students as a cornerstone of the "mutually responsible" classroom. They spend a week preparing their classes to "do" peer response in much the same way that Mary K. Healy describes in her essay "Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom." As a first step, students do freewrites about their attitudes toward being critiqued positively and negatively, whether that criticism has come in their written work or in some other area of their lives. After talking about the concept of criticism in general, the class is encouraged to share criticism that they have received in the past on their writing, and they then discuss whether or not they felt these criticisms were constructive. After this, students respond to a sample student paper from a previous class. In comparing and contrasting their responses to the sample, they have the opportunity to view the sample paper with previous student comments. They then begin to engage in the response process with each other's work. When a student returns another student's first draft (with comments), the writer then prepares a second draft for the teacher alone, along with a "revision essay" discussing the changes made. Attached are examples of a first draft, second draft, revision essay, and student comments. Contains a 4-item bibliography. (NKA)

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Dialogic Assessment: Toward a "Conversational" Peer Response Method

In the course of my dissertation research, which involves among other things a discussion of how graduate students who teach composition use peer response in their own writing, I have come across many articles addressing how to help students respond more productively to each other's work in writing classes. In their article "Conflicting Demands in Writing Response Groups," Margaret Tipper and Martin Malone address how to short-circuit the inevitable conflicts that arise when students respond to each other's papers in groups. In this article, Tipper and Malone describe the difference between what they term "positive and negative straddling comments" that students make on each other's work, with positive straddling comments being defined as remarks that "probe the writer's meaning while simultaneously holding it up to the requirements of the assignment." (82). Teacher modeling, as well as the students taking an active part in what goes on in the classroom, plays an important role in how students develop the ability to make positive straddling comments. For example, Tipper and Malone suggest that teachers, in order to create successful peer response groups, foster an atmosphere of "mutual responsibility," which echoes the sentiments of Kenneth Bruffee during the early days of collaborative writing. In their respective Freshman Seminar classes, Tipper and Malone's students "...worked together on projects, made decisions about curriculum, classroom activities, and writing topics. Students helped set evaluation criteria, evaluated one another and the teacher, and took on teaching responsibilities." (83). In other words, students were given the ability to be as "equal" to the teacher as possible, within the limitations of the curriculum and the institution.

A classroom in which students and teacher negotiate common goals and common vocabulary, the type of classroom Tipper and Malone appear to be striving for, would

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seem to be the perfect place for dialogue about student assessment. In these "mutually responsible" classrooms, students and teachers decide together how the teacher will evaluate the papers and they decide the goals of the course; therefore, when students respond, they can try to respond in a way that fits with the evaluation criteria that they have helped establish with (and for) their teacher and yet do not have to feel the pressure of assigning a final evaluation themselves—naturally, within the limitations of the university, final evaluation of student work rests with the teacher. However, students in these "mutually responsible" classrooms are able to dialogue with their teachers concerning what makes a productive response to student work, and therefore both teacher and students can make responses during the drafting process that can lead to favorable evaluations.

The concept of teachers modeling responses for students is a cornerstone of the "mutually responsible" classroom. Some colleagues and I have taken this idea to heart and spend a week preparing our classes to "do" peer response in much the same way that Mary K. Healy describes in her essay "Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom" from Teaching Writing: Essays from the Bay Area Writing Project. As a first step, students do freewrites about their attitudes toward being critiqued positively and negatively, whether that criticism has come in their written work or some other area of their lives. After talking about the concept of criticism in general, I encourage the class to share criticism that they have received in the past on their writing, and we discuss as a class whether or not they felt these criticisms were constructive. More likely than not, most students' previous experiences with response to their writing consists mainly of grammatical/mechanical marks with a brief end comment.

After this initial discussion of what might make constructive criticism in terms of writing, students respond to a sample student paper, one that is typically from one of my previous 101 classes. After the class compares and contrasts their responses to the sample writing, they have the opportunity to view the same sample paper with previous

student comments. In other words, they can see and discuss how previous 101 students responded to the paper, and then compare and contrast their own responses with those of previous students. They also have the opportunity to view teacher responses to the sample student papers so that they may compare and contrast student responses with teacher responses--in other words, we strive to create a common "responding community" of which teacher and student alike may be a part.

Once we have done some discussion of how to respond to a paper and once students have had some practice in responding to sample papers, they begin to engage in the response process with each other's work. Students are given an entire class period to make written marginal and end comments to a first draft of a peer's work. As we teach in computer classrooms, some students choose to have peers respond to their work on disk, typing comments within the text and adding an end comment. At the end of the class period, students give the drafts back to the author and are encouraged to discuss comments with the author before leaving the room to help clarify any comments that the author may find confusing. Students are then given time both during and outside class over a period of days to complete a second draft.

On the day that the second draft is due, it is due to the teacher alone. However, before the students turn in their revised draft, they are asked to write a "revision essay" in which they discuss what changes they made from the first draft to the second, what role peer comments played in these changes, and what they still feel they could improve upon. Perhaps most significantly, students are asked to comment on what they would like to do differently in an additional draft of the paper. Although these papers and revision letters are coming to the teacher at this point, students will have an opportunity later on in the semester to draft these papers again and receive addition peer responses, and the prompts for revision letters are designed with these future revisions in mind. In Illinois State's writing program, English 101 students are required to do an end of the semester portfolio in which they revise certain works that have been written throughout the semester.

Hopefully, students can look back at these revision letters when it comes time to revise papers for the portfolio and have a sense of what they still need to revise and how they would like to go about revising. Therefore, even though student papers come to the teacher after the second draft, they are not considered "finished products" at this point--the teacher comments and revision letters are designed to further prepare students for the final portfolio.

Students turn in a "paper packet" to the teacher which consists of their first draft with peer comments, their second draft and their revision letter. In this way, the teacher has the opportunity to see the full "history" of the paper's development to this point. When the teacher responds to the second draft in the context of the peer comments on the first draft and the writer's revision letter, the dialogue becomes evident. The teacher not only responds to the second draft of the paper but to the peer comments and to the student's assessment of her own work at an early stage in the drafting process.

In an example of a paper from my class (Appendix A), Allen wrote a first draft of a paper which was to analyze the views of male and female communication put forth by Deborah Tannen and Robin Lakoff. This draft received two peer responses; one from Kyle, for whom English is a second language, and one from Katie. Your handout includes Allen's first draft, entitled On My Way to Marriage Counseling with Kyle's comments in bold and Katie's comments in italics. As you can see from each student's end note to Allen, Kyle's comments are more supportive and somewhat vague while Katie's comments are a bit more critical, pushing Allen to give more examples; however, their marginal comments are a mix of critical questions and surface level suggestions. While one can see that Allen's second draft (Appendix B) still needs some work, he took Katie's advice and tried to discuss both Tannen's and Lakoff's essays (especially Lakoff's) in more detail.

What is perhaps most interesting about Allen's paper packet, however, is his revision essay (Appendix C). To me, the revision essay is where dialogic assessment

reaches its peak--as a teacher, I am, in reading and commenting on the revision letter, joining a conversation that has already been going on between Allen, Kyle and Katie. As you will notice, Allen's revision essay gives me the room to not only support the peer comments made by Katie (beginning of paragraph three), but it also allows Allen the opportunity to assess his paper before I do. What I have found in doing these revision letters with students is that many students assess themselves in the same way that I would; students seem to know where their strengths and weaknesses lie as writers without my having to make these comments to them. For example, at the end of Allen's revision essay, he writes "I should have used more examples, personal and from the articles. I would have liked to spend more time on final revision if I could have." My comment in the margin was an enthusiastic "yes!"—Allen's own assessment of his paper supports most of the comments that I had been making on his second draft. Now Allen knows that he has my support in his assessment of his own work, and he will hopefully push himself to add in more examples from the articles in a portfolio draft of his paper. While Allen seem less than enthusiastic about using his peer comments, at the very least, through commenting on his revision essay I can give him support for the revisions he has made and wants to make on his own.

While I have been happy with the way students respond to themselves and each other through this dialogic method, the method is--of course--not infallible. I have both noticed that students still--although to a lesser degree—obsess about correcting grammatical/mechanical errors in other's papers, sometimes completely ignoring a paper's content. A second concern is that of students still giving more credence to teacher comments despite teacher efforts to validate the comments of the students. When a teacher enters a dialogue, the danger always exists of students ignoring the student comments that have come before and only paying attention to the comments that teachers have added to the dialogue because the teacher is the one who gives the final evaluation. These are dilemmas to which we have yet to discover the solutions in our respective

classes. If anything, this compulsion to fix commas and only heed teacher comments shows how deeply embedded the idea of response and assessment as solely an error-driven and grade driven proposition is with students and that one cannot expect students to recover from years of being evaluated through their writing in the space of a few weeks, or even an entire semester.

While the road to "peer response-as-dialogue" is one that students and teachers alike are apparently still traveling, perhaps we are making some inroads into how students view the process of writing and responding to papers. In the introduction to her portfolio, Mandy, one of my former students, noted how peer response helped her with her writing:

> ...I found myself thinking differently when I sit down in front of a computer structuring my essays. I think the revision part of this class really helped me. For example, when I was writing the first draft for "My Best Job," I apparently misunderstood the purpose and the audience... In my second draft, I approached the subject from a different point of view and talked a lot about my abilities to carry this job. This is a big step for me because now I can do global revision.

Mandy goes on to note that the class and peer response helped her to see things in different ways, a process that she stated could help her not only with writing but also with life. While she is just one student in one class, I feel that her sentiment echoes what peer response should be all about. Rather than being an empty exercise done for the teacher and for class requirements--in other words, an evaluative measure--peer response should be a way of helping students with *revision*, with re-*seeing*, what their work is and can be.

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Appendix A

Allen--Draft #1 (Kyle's comments are in **bold**, Katie's comments are in *italics*)

On my way to Marriage Counseling

For thousands of years, men and women have always had their own form of communication with each other. According to Robin Lakoff men have a more vulgar caveman type language, were as women speak more calmly and more gently then men do. In the article that Lakoff wrote "Talking like a lady" she explains that women tend to use words such as "dear, cute, lovely, etc." She also says that if men were to use these types of words they would be considered a homosexual. Lakoffs ideas were ahead of her time back in 1973 when this article was written. Since then things have changed dramatically. The */take out "the"--start with "women"/* women are no longer expected to stay home with the children and in many cases is the breadwinner of the family. **[Outstanding paragraph--great job]**

Deborah Tannen wrote a more updated approach. Her article was written in 1991, giving it a little more credibility considering it is more current. **[Why is it more credible?]** In the article "Sex, Lies and conversation" Tannen gives a lot of background information. This article explains why men and women communicate differently by giving examples. Tannen also says that everyone's communication skills begins at childhood with the parents. Do the parents keep an open line of communication for their kids or do they shut them out. All these factors play into person's habits and how they tend to deal with situations. For example, when a little girl begins to learn how to communicate [*form communication skills*] she is usually with another girl and they bond

by telling stories and secrets. Boys on the other hand tend to fight and play sports to bond.

Obviously, when you have two different types of communication skills they will eventually bump heads with each other. Some men have a hard time talking to women and visa *[vice]* versa. For this reason, lack of communication is the number one cause of divorce. Simply because there is a bridge between the sexes. Each gets frustrated with one another and things come to an end.

Allen,

Add more stuff like where is similarities and add more support. This paper is outstanding. Good grammar you have. So far the paper keeps going good but you need to add more stuff to it.

Kyle

Allen,

In your essay you should write more about Lakoff's essay. Your supposed to be comparing and contrasting. Try to give some more examples of each essay.

Katie

Appendix B

Allen--draft #2 (instructor comments in **bold**)

On my way to Marriage Counseling

For thousands of years, men and women have always had their own form of communication with each other. According to Robin Lakoff men have a more vulgar caveman type language, were as **[whereas]** women speak more calmly and more gently then men do. In the article that Lakoff wrote "Talking like a lady" she explains that women tend to use words such as "dear, cute, lovely, etc." She also says that if men were to use these types of words they would be considered a homosexual. Lakoffs [**'s**] ideas were ahead of her time back in 1973 when this article was written. Since then things have changed dramatically. Women are no longer expected to stay home with the children and in many cases is the breadwinner of the family.

Deborah Tannen wrote a more updated approach. Her article was written in 1991, giving it a little more credibility [**In general? Or just to the audience whom you are addressing?**] considering it is more current. In the article "Sex, Lies and conversation" Tannen gives a lot of background information. This article explains why men and women communicate differently by giving examples. [**Can you summarize some of her examples?**] Tannen also says that everyone's communication skills begins at childhood with the parents. Do the parents keep an open line of communication for their kids or do they shut them out? All these factors play into person's habits and how they tend to deal with situations. For example, when a little girl begins to form communication skills, she is usually with another girl and they bond by telling stories and secrets. Boys on the other hand tend to fight and play sports to bond.

Obviously, when you have two different types of communication skills they will eventually bump heads with each other. Some men have a hard time talking to women and vice versa. For this reason, lack of communication is the number one cause of divorce. Simply because there is a bridge between the sexes. Each sex gets frustrated with one another and things come to an end. This is true in many cases, men and women don't know how to relate to one another and in turn communication becomes the bridge between them. [**Is Tannen saying all of these things, or are these your opinions about Tannen's article?**]

Lakoff and Tannen both present their information in unique ways. For instance, Lakoff uses sophisticated words [**Examples would help here**] to get her point across and doesn't explain in depth her main points but in turn hits many small points. Lakoffs audience is much older and mature. It is very evident when reading Lakoffs article that she is writing to people within her field of study [**Examples would help here, too**]. Tannen on the other hand writes more towards a general audience, focusing more on certain situations and examples. Tannens audience is the common person. Tannen pretty much draws everything out [**Again, give some examples of how she does this in her essay**] that she is saying so that the audience can see first hand what she is talking about.

Even though both writers present their information in different ways, the topic is the same. I believe that both women have unresolved issues about past experiences with men in their lives and both these papers are a way for them to vent out their frustrations. Both women talk about how lack of communication is a difficult problem between men and women. Both these articles were very good, but I believe that Tannen presented the

information in a professional manner. The article was easy to read and it was much easier to digest without getting utterly offended.

Appendix C

Allen's Revision Essay (instructor comments in **bold**)

I know my paper could have been much better if I just had a little more time to work on it. I had many good ideas and I think I encorporated them into my paper. I am not extremely happy with the paper because I felt that I focused too much on what my peer responders said that I didn't write rather than how I would have wanted to.

This was a good topic to write about. It required thought and it gave me a chance to compare and contrast a political issue. Which I enjoyed very much. I think my paper flows nicely [**yes, it does**] and I definitely chose a side. The reader should be able to do the same.

Some changes I made were the fact that I used a lot of ideas the peer responders gave me. For example, using similarities. I wrote an ending paragraph on similarities between the articles. [**Yes--Katie really helped you out here. Your final draft has a much stronger analysis**] I also made some revisions on my own that weren't prompted by peer comments. I talked about experiences that I feel Tannen and Lakoff had about men. I feel these articles were very much male bashing.[**This is something that you might want to explore further and more in depth in a later draft--why do you feel they are male bashing?**] I feel I gave good examples on the different writing styles of the articles and how when you present the same information in a more professional way people will be more understanding. [**This was definitely a strong point of the paper**] Both articles are male bashing, but Tannens candy coats it so it is easier to swallow. I should have used more examples, personal and from the articles. [**Yes! See my**

comments on page 2 of your paper] I would have liked to spend more time on final revisions if I could have.